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# Are Undergraduates Able to Identify Instances of Plagiarism?

*Ho Chui Chui*

*This paper reports the findings from a survey on plagiarism that the author conducted among students pursuing a law foundation programme. They were administered a questionnaire with ten statements. Students were asked to identify the statements they considered as instances of plagiarism. Although a majority of the participants were able to identify most cases of plagiarism, almost half (47%) did not identify paraphrasing materials in their own words without citing the source of information as an example of plagiarism. In addition, summarising materials without indicating the source is not considered as an act of plagiarism by as many as 61% of the respondents. It is concluded that some students are probably plagiarising their assignments because they are unclear as to what constitutes plagiarism.*

## Introduction

One of the essential academic writing skills that college or university undergraduates should possess is the ability to use their sources as evidence to support their claims. Students are expected to provide proper documentation (e.g. MLA, APA, CBE, etc.) whether they choose to quote directly (word for word), paraphrase or summarise their sources. They can opt to use footnotes, endnotes or in-text citations. If students fail to follow the conventions of referencing borrowed materials, they are deemed to have committed plagiarism.

Plagiarism can range from a blatant form, for instance, copying from source without appropriate documentation, to subtle forms such as giving credit to their source, but the original author's words are unencumbered by quotation marks or the paraphrasing closely resembles the original.

Research on plagiarism has been mostly carried out in the West, particularly in the United States of America. In the first large-scale, multi-campus study, Bowers (1964) surveyed more than 5 000 students

from 99 campuses. He found that 30% of his respondents admitted to plagiarism. His seminal work was replicated 30 years later by McCabe and Trevino at 9 of the schools that had participated in Bower's original survey. The results showed that 26% of the respondents had engaged in plagiarism in their written work (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001).

In a review of studies conducted in the US and Canada between 1970 and 1996, Whitley (1998) found that the prevalence of plagiarism ranged from a low of 3% to a high of 98%, with a mean of 47%. In a study that was not included in the review, Roig (1997) reported that over 50% of the sample could not distinguish between texts that were plagiarized and those that were correctly paraphrased. The samples were undergraduates from two private colleges.

A pioneer study conducted in the United Kingdom found that 60% of the sample had paraphrased without giving proper credit to their sources while 54% had copied from a text without acknowledgement (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995). This finding is within the range reported by Whitley (1998) in his review of the research carried out in the US and Canada.

Students in the new millennium are no different. A recent study conducted at a large regional college in the United States revealed that 27% of the respondents reported copying a few sentences without reference to source (Stearns, 2001).

With the advent of the Internet, students have begun to plagiarise from online sources as well. In a multi-campus study, McCabe (2001) reported that 10% of the students were found to have copied several sentences from a web site without attribution while another 5% had submitted a paper that was obtained online. However, data from his more recent surveys show that more than 35% of students plagiarise from the web (D. McCabe, personal communication, November 14, 2005). Citing data from a survey conducted at nine (9) universities, Scanlon and Neumann (2002) found that 25% had cut and pasted text from the Internet without proper documentation (as cited in Scanlon, 2003).

In a Singaporean study, Lim and See (2001) who collected data from 518 students in three educational institutions reported that 90% paraphrased material from another source without giving credit to the original author while 85% copied material for coursework from a book or other publications without attribution. These findings are also within the range reported by Whitley (1998) in his review of US and Canadian studies on cheating.

The literature suggests that plagiarism is common among students in institutions of higher education in the West. However, there seems to be a dearth of research concerning this issue among Asian students, particularly in Malaysia. Are our students plagiarizing their work? Do they know what constitutes plagiarism? Can they identify various types of plagiarism?

To shed light on these questions, a small study was undertaken on a group of students in a Malaysian university branch campus.

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

The participants in this study were 38 students in their final semester, pursuing a law matriculation course at a branch campus of a local Malaysian university. The total number of students who had registered for the academic reading and writing course was 42.

### **Instrument and Procedure**

A questionnaire, which consisted of ten statements that were all instances of plagiarism, was distributed during the first meeting with the students. As two students were absent, a total of 40 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, but only 38 provided usable data as two others were incomplete.

Students had to decide whether each statement was an example of plagiarism. If they were unsure, they could tick the appropriate column.

## **Results**

The percentage of responses to each statement was calculated. The findings are summarized in Table 1 in the appendix.

It was found that 74% of the sample correctly identified stealing someone else's words and passing them off as their own (Statement 1) as a case of plagiarism. However, 21% said that this action was not so while 5% were unsure.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (55%) identified copying the source's exact words without using quotation marks even though the source is mentioned (Statement 2) as an act of plagiarism. Twenty-six

per cent did not consider this as plagiarism while another 18% were unsure.

Presenting someone else's **idea or opinion** as though it was theirs (Statement 3) was felt to be a case of plagiarism by a large majority of the respondents (87%). However, using people's **statistics/data** (Statement 4) and **illustrations** (Statement 5) without attribution were not considered plagiarism by many of the respondents (58% and 53% respectively). Another 26% and 34% identified Statements 4 and 5 as not instances of plagiarism while 16% and 13% were unsure.

As for Statement 6 (paraphrasing materials without citing the source), only 34% rightly identified this as an example of plagiarism. It was found that 47% did not think that this was plagiarism while 18% were unsure.

A majority of the respondents (61%) did not identify summarizing materials without indicating the source (Statement 7) as plagiarism while another 21% indicated that they were not sure. Only 18% correctly identified Statement 7 as an instance of plagiarism.

It was also found that half the respondents identified submitting an assignment which they did not completely write themselves (Statement 8) as an instance of plagiarism; 32% indicated that it was not while 18% were unsure. In contrast, 68% identified turning in a paper which they had purchased over the Internet (Statement 9) as plagiarism. Meanwhile, 21% did not consider this as an instance of plagiarism while those who were unsure comprised 11% of the sample.

Statement 10 on handing in the same assignment (with minor changes) for two different courses was not identified as an example of plagiarism by 42% of the sample with 24% being unsure. Only 34% felt that this was a case of plagiarism.

## **Discussion**

Although more than half of the respondents correctly identified all statements except Statements 6, 7 and 10 as instances of plagiarism, there is cause for worry as 21% of the respondents do not consider it wrong to steal people's words and pass them off as their own (Statement 1). This particular action is considered **blatant** plagiarism among academic scholars.

Another disturbing finding is that over a quarter of the students do not think it is plagiarism when they copy their source's exact words without using quotation marks if they have cited the source (Statement

2). Statement 2 illustrates a case of **inadvertent** plagiarism. However, whether students deliberately or inadvertently plagiarize their paper, it should not be condoned.

The finding that paraphrasing (Statement 6) and summarising (Statement 7) materials without acknowledging the source do not constitute plagiarism is not exactly surprising. This could be partly due to the respondents' experience in their previous English course where they were required to summarise and paraphrase texts without having to cite the author(s) and other publication information. It is suggested that students be required to give a simple acknowledgement of the source before proceeding with the summary of a text.

Another matter of concern is the acceptance of self-plagiarism among the respondents. Handing in the same assignment (with minor modifications) for two different courses (Statement 10) is not considered plagiarism to 42% of the sample. Perhaps they think this is not a case of plagiarism as they did in actual fact write the whole paper themselves. It is recommended that students inform their respective lecturers before hand of their intention, and if permission is granted, they will not be accused of plagiarising their work later on.

The results of this small study are consistent with that of past research (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995; Lim & See, 2001; McCabe, 2001; Roig, 1997; Stearns, 2001; Whitley, 1998). It can be concluded that plagiarism is a problem among students pursuing the foundation programme in law at this institution of higher learning. Many students appear to be unclear as to what constitutes plagiarism and may be plagiarising their work.

Although the findings of this small study cannot be generalised to other students in this branch campus as well as those at the other branch campuses, the evidence gathered should not be ignored. A fellow colleague who teaches this same group of students report writing also complains that they commonly plagiarise the literature review section of their report.

## **Implications**

Students should be reminded of the consequences of being caught for plagiarising. They must be told that plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated, be it from printed or electronic sources.

McCabe and Pavela (2004) suggest instructors teach students about the fair use of web sources. They warn that if solutions to student online

plagiarism are not found soon, students who submit honest work may feel that they have to resort to plagiarism as well to level the playing field.

Research has shown that it is effective and non-time consuming to teach students how to recognize and avoid plagiarism. According to Landau, Druen and Arcuri (2002), undergraduates are able to learn to detect and avoid plagiarism in a short period of time.

It is recommended that students be required to take a course on academic writing in their first semester. This will definitely set them off on the right track in their academic career and hopefully will help students to avoid the problem of plagiarism.

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**Appendix****Table 1: Summary of Survey Results (%)**

	Yes	No	Not sure
<b>Plagiarism is:</b>			
1) stealing someone else's <b>words</b> and passing them off as your own.	73.68	21.05	5.26
2) copying the source's exact words <b>without quotation marks</b> (" ") although you have mentioned the source.	55.26	26.32	18.42
3) presenting someone else's <b>idea or opinion</b> as though it were yours.	86.84	10.53	2.63
4) using someone else's <b>statistics/data</b> without giving credit to the source.	57.89	34.21	13.16
5) using someone else's <b>illustrations</b> (maps, charts, graphs, photos, etc) without acknowledging the source.	52.63	34.21	13.16
6) <b>paraphrasing</b> materials in your own words without citing the source of information.	34.21	47.37	18.42
7) <b>summarising</b> materials without indicating the source of information.	18.42	60.53	21.05
8) submitting an assignment which you <b>didn't completely write</b> yourself.	50.00	31.58	18.42
9) turning in a paper which you <b>had bought</b> over the Internet.	68.42	21.05	10.53
10) handing in the <b>same</b> assignment (with minor changes) for two different courses.	34.21	42.11	23.68